

Speech by John Hume MP MEP

*Foreign policy as an art of negotiation: the Irish example of reaching peace in the
face of terror*

State Legislative Leaders' Foundation

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I am very grateful to the State Legislative Leaders' Foundation – and to Steve Lakis and Alfons Schops in particular - for the opportunity to address this timely and valuable Transatlantic Forum.

In speaking to this conference today, I want to address some of the major challenges that face a world that is fast changing – for better and for worse - at the beginning of a new century. I am speaking of the challenge of building unbreakable peace. The challenge of safeguarding the fundamental human rights of all people. The challenge of addressing the deep inequities that persist between the developed and developing world.

In particular, I want to share my own experiences of the conflict in Ireland. I want to outline the efforts that have been made over three decades and more to end the most awful chapter in the recent history of our country. And perhaps of greatest importance in these increasingly uncertain times, I want to express my deeply held belief that all conflicts can be ended, no matter the depth of divisions they have created or the brutality of history they have endured.

I say these things because I believe in the Northern Ireland peace process, in the Good Friday Agreement and in all the promise it holds out for our people.

I believe the Agreement will be sustained through present difficulties because the principles of equality, partnership and respect for difference are rock solid principles

upon which we can build a new society free from violence and fear. They are the cornerstone values for conflict resolution.

I believe we will reach the stage where the main shared objective of nationalists and unionists alike will be to end the poverty that has ghettoised many of our urban communities. I believe the two major traditions that share the island of Ireland can work well together along with all the other traditions on the island to provide better opportunities for our children, to guarantee a higher standard of living and to create a better society for all people.

I believe that the Good Friday Agreement, cultivated over many years out of the seemingly barren wasteland of violence and political inertia, has the potential – if given the chance in the long term - to fulfil this vision by transforming the nature of life on the entire island of Ireland for the better.

And even more, I believe our Agreement offers not just hope, but a real and practical conflict resolution blueprint for other areas of conflict around the world. This is a theme to which I will return later.

It is clear to me that the most fundamental challenge that faces the world at the beginning of the twenty first century is the challenge of permanent peace. I hope the experiences I can share in relation to the peace process in Northern Ireland will be beneficial.

From our experience in Northern Ireland, the path of change is often painful and frequently it is frustrating. Peace and equality drops slowly upon hardened hearts and minds. Undoubtedly, we have a long distance left to travel; our problems have not disappeared by any means. But we have come so far in just a few years, there is no way on earth we can turn back now.

When one stops to think of where our society in Northern Ireland was ten years ago in 1992, with a political vacuum and ongoing violence of the most awful nature, it is a fundamentally different society to the one in which we live today. And so I ask you to imagine the Ireland we can enjoy in another ten years if we keep building on the foundations of peace and stability the Good Friday Agreement has provided. Put in those terms, there is only one course we can follow.

Today in Northern Ireland, for the first time in more years than any of us can recall, a new generation of young people are growing up with a genuine sense that 'hope and history rhyme', as the Poet Laureate Seamus Heaney once famously wrote.

The Good Friday Agreement has provided us all with a powerful template for creating lasting peace in our country. In spite of our tragic past, and perhaps even because of it, the Agreement has given us real hope for a new shared future.

I vividly remember the morning of Good Friday 1998 at Castle Buildings in Belfast, where the various parties' negotiating teams had been based day in day out for almost two years. Castle Buildings is a soulless place, more reminiscent of a government office than a setting where history was made. Political opponents worked across tiny corridors from each other. People who had never spoken to each other found common ground in the daily routine of having lunch. Friendships were forged among former sworn enemies. And as the sun rose over Castle Buildings on Good Friday, a wonderful sense of anticipation grew that the sun was about to shine on a new political era for our people.

After a thirty-year journey, a journey that had begun with civil rights in the late sixties, agreement was reached between the two great traditions in Ireland. Nationalism and Unionism had 'taken collective breath and blown away the cobwebs of the past', to paraphrase the Irish writer Fergal Keane. The Agreement was also supported by the British and Irish Governments. More important, it was

endorsed in referendum by the people of Ireland, North and South. That endorsement was viewed as essential by the SDLP, given that we had consistently said that any agreement would have to be put to the people.

The SDLP philosophy on how we could resolve the conflict in the North of Ireland goes to the very core of the Good Friday Agreement. As far back as 1970 when our party was first founded, we in the SDLP recognised that to adequately address the core of our divisions we would have to address the three sets of relationships. We understood that we needed to address the relationship between the people of Northern Ireland, the relationship among the people of Ireland, and the relationship between the people of Ireland and the people of Britain.

We stated as far back as 1977 that only a real and dynamic partnership between all our people could solve our problems. I said at the time:

“The necessity of equality, the necessity of consent, can now be promoted only by a partnership between the two Irish traditions. The road towards that partnership will be long and hard...but there must be a beginning, a first step in what may well be a journey of a thousand leagues.”

And so, after a long and difficult journey of a thousand leagues and more, after many lost lives and broken hearts, we have indeed reached a new plateau. From here we can look forward to a new Ireland that is free from its tragic past and inspired by the dream of dynamic partnership and permanent peace.

Although we in the SDLP had no illusions about the scope and the magnitude of the job at hand, our purpose was to try and get beyond the sterile conflict between nationalism and unionism in Northern Ireland. In a vacuum of unspeakable violence from both republicans and loyalists, we believed it was necessary to work towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland by focussing on the real social and economic

issues that tend to bring people together rather than divide them. Economic development and job creation, housing, health, education were all issues that existing parties had little interest in at that time. By working on such problems, we hoped to challenge the sectarian divisions in our society and make people on all sides realise that while there is much that divides us there is still more that unites us.

At the same time, we believed it was important to put Northern Ireland into a much wider context: Anglo-Irish, European and international.

Anglo-Irish, so that the British and Irish governments confronted their responsibilities and worked together to bring about an honourable accommodation within these islands.

European, so that Ireland, North and South, would be part of the emerging united Europe.

International, so that we could draw on the support and influence of the Irish diaspora in North America and elsewhere - something that has been extremely effective and important as I will illustrate later.

Above all, we wanted to build an Ireland free from sectarian division, bringing our society into the European mainstream and creating an economy capable of providing decent jobs and living conditions for all our people, irrespective of politics or religion.

The key concept in our thinking was the need for an Ireland based in agreement, ordered by human rights and driven forward by equality. Essentially this meant that we needed to find a political agreement that would allow unionists and nationalists to find a way to share the island of Ireland with the identities of all intact. We knew

we had to create a new political dispensation in which the rights and aspirations of all would be respected.

Much to our own frustration, and at much cost to the community, we had to wait until 1998 and the Good Friday Agreement to see the framework of a new agreed Ireland put in place.

It is a terrible tragedy that so many lives were lost in a conflict the awful brutality of which was matched only by its utter futility. The deep wound of three decades of violence is only now being allowed to heal.

Historians will ultimately have to decide how successful we in the SDLP have been in achieving our aims thus far. But I would like to point a number of factors that any objective analysis of our success or failure will have to take into account.

Through participation in the political system at all levels, we have put Northern Ireland on the political map. In Westminster, in Strasbourg, in Washington, we have been consistently constructive. We have been the engineers and drivers of positive political ideas and innovation in Northern Ireland for three decades and more.

We pioneered the concept of power sharing in local government, which is now the normality and is actually at the centre of the Good Friday Agreement. Due in large part to our contacts, we have gained political and material support from the European Union and the United States in bringing about an end to conflict. Our ideological influence on the substance of the Good Friday Agreement is self-evident.

In dealing with the problem in Northern Ireland throughout the past thirty-two years, we in the SDLP have been totally consistent:

Consistent in our total opposition to violence, in the face of intimidation and castigation over many years from some who have since seen that violence is wrong, immoral and counter-productive.

Consistent in our support of partnership and equality, in the face of discrimination and injustice over many years from some who now participate in the working of the partnership administration established under the Agreement.

Consistent in our advocacy of the consent principle, in the face of vilification and attack over many years from some who have only recently come to agree with that principle.

In reality, we in the SDLP have stood consistent, neither bending with the wind nor breaking with the waves. The only vindication we sought, for we never sought victory, was the vindication of agreement among our people and lasting peace in our country.

We argued that there were two mindsets, both of which had to change. The Unionist and Nationalist mindsets.

The Unionists wished to protect their identity and their ethos and we had no quarrel with that. Not only did they have every right to protect their identity, it is absolutely essential in attempting to resolve our problem that the Unionist identity is fully protected and respected. No conflict resolution process that seeks to undermine or devalue the rights and identities of others will ever succeed. Trust and respect can never be built upon underhand practices designed for short-term political gain. Honesty and integrity are essential and we in the SDLP always had the integrity to try to reassure unionists that we are honest in our attempts to find an accommodation that would underline, not undermine, their sense of identity.

Rather we argued against the methods used by Unionism in trying to protect its identity and rights. It was the way in which they unashamedly held all power in their own hands for so many years, using whatever means possible to keep grip on their control. The system in the old Northern Ireland, under the old Stormont regime, was to exclude anyone who was not a unionist. This, of course, led to widespread discrimination in jobs, housing and voting rights.

Our challenge to Unionism was to recognise that because of their geography and their numbers the conflict in Northern Ireland could never be resolved without them and any solution required their participation and endorsement. Therefore, we called on them to come to the negotiating table and reach an agreement that would fully uphold their identity. They did this on Good Friday 1998.

One of the principle responsibilities of leadership is to challenge one's own thinking as well as the thinking of others. To this end, we in the SDLP knew that the Nationalist mindset, the mindset of many of the people we represent, had to change as well.

The SDLP's challenge to that mindset was that it was people who have rights, not territory and that without people any piece of earth is only a jungle. We argued that it was the people of Ireland who were divided, not the territory and therefore agreement among the people was the only solution. The natural logic of our challenge to the nationalist mindset was that given that our people were divided, violence could play no role in bringing them together. Violence could – and tragically did – serve only to drive our people further apart. The line on the map is only a symptom of the much deeper border in the hearts and minds of people.

Therefore, the changes we argued for in both mindsets would fulfil the same objective of agreement. In preparation for such an agreement, there had to be a clear definition of the problem that needed to be resolved. Again, the SDLP was

consistent throughout the troubles. Therefore, our analysis of the problem and our strategy for resolving it remained consistent.

We argued that any solution would centre around three sets of relationships – relations within Northern Ireland, relations within the broader island of Ireland and relations between Britain and Ireland. The logic of our position was that in any talks aimed at reaching agreement, those three sets of relationships should be central to the negotiating framework and both the Irish and British governments should be involved as well as the parties in the North.

Nowadays, it is taken for granted that the two governments work together. But it took a considerable number of years to bring that about because, for many years, successive British Governments refused to engage in dialogue about Northern Ireland with the Irish Government, given their argument that Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom.

Given that the SDLP analysis of the problem centred around the three sets of relationships, it was logical for us to vigorously pursue such a strategy and indeed, we published a policy document in April 1981 which is greatly reflected in the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.

The Anglo-Irish Agreement was, in my opinion, the first major step in our peace process. Article One of the Agreement underlined its significance:

- (a) "The two governments affirm that any change in the status of Northern Ireland would only come about with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland;
- (b) Recognise that the present wish of a majority of people of Northern Ireland is for no change in the status of Northern Ireland;

(c) Declare that, if in future a majority of the people of Northern Ireland clearly wish for and formally consent to the establishment of a united Ireland, they will introduce and support in the respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish;"

It was very significant that the Irish Government was accepting the principle of consent, which Sinn Fein has only come to accept very recently, having spent years rubbishing the idea. When the SDLP was formed, we made clear in our constitution that we would be seeking the unity of the people of Ireland through agreement and consent. This is a principle that was very central to our consistent strategy and is now accepted by the whole of nationalist Ireland.

We in the SDLP also proposed that with any agreement reached, the last word would have to be left with the people of Ireland and not with the politicians. We proposed joint referendum. The vast majority of the people of Ireland, North and South, have consented to the Good Friday Agreement, which gives the Agreement a mandate that transcends either Unionism or Nationalism.

From our point of view at the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, what was crucial was article 1c, pursuing unity by consent, which we in the SDLP worked towards. In discussions with the Thatcher government, we made the point that the consistent position of the British Government had been that Northern Ireland was an integral part of the UK because a majority so wished. We asked Margaret Thatcher what would be the case if a majority wished for Irish unity. Would the British Government agree to it?

I put forward this question to deal with the traditional reason for violence given by the IRA – that the British were in Ireland defending their economic and strategic interests by force and therefore the Irish had the right to use force to put them out. In welcoming the Anglo-Irish Agreement, I pointed out that the British Government

now had declared their neutrality on the future of Northern Ireland, that Irish unity was therefore a matter for those who wanted it to persuade those who did not. The traditional – and if I many say so spurious and dangerous - reason given by the IRA for the use of violence had been removed.

My statement on the neutrality and call for an end to violence led, some time later to a request for a meeting with Sinn Fein and it led to the talks with Gerry Adams. As I said, the traditional justification given by the IRA for the use of violence was that the British were in Ireland defending their own interests by force and they were preventing the Irish people from exercising the right to self-determination. My response in talks was that while the Irish people should have the right to self-determination, they were divided on how to exercise that right. If the Irish people are defined as all people who live on the island, violence or physical force was not a solution. In fact, this was an obvious contradiction, given that violence could only deepen the divisions. Agreement, I argued time and time again, was the necessary and only solution.

Regarding the other reason used by Sinn Fein to justify violence, I argued that the British did not have any economic or strategic reason for being in Ireland. Basically, as the dialogue between Sinn Fein and myself took place, I was asked to prove those points as it would lead to a cease-fire.

My response, in agreement with Gerry Adams, was to get a declaration from both governments making these points. Such a declaration would lead to an end to violence followed by all party talks with both governments, whose objective would be to reach an agreement that would enjoy the allegiance of the entire community.

I kept both the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey and the Prime Minister, who was by now John Major, privately informed of my talks with Gerry Adams. I worked for a considerable period of time to agree a proposed joint statement to be put to both

governments. I was in constant contact with the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, until we finally reached an agreement on a proposed joint declaration. Mr Haughey fully briefed his successor, Albert Reynolds, and together Albert Reynolds and John Major eventually made the Downing Street Declaration, which led to a cease-fire and the talk process that led to the Good Friday Agreement we have today.

And as we meet here today, the political process in Northern Ireland, for so long under terrible pressure, is beginning to work very effectively to the benefit of all our people, although we must remain honest about the ongoing and escalating scourge of sectarian hatred that continues to exist on our streets.

Political parties from across the spectrum are working together and working well together. Only last week, the First and Deputy First Ministers announced a major new funding package that will particularly benefit health, education and infrastructure. This is real politics at work.

Upon the rock-solid foundations of the Agreement, we are building together a new type of politics. It is the politics of partnership. The politics of equality. The politics of justice. These are better days for Northern Ireland. I am certain we are on the road to unbreakable peace and the will of our people is unstoppable.

As I have already said, I believe the Good Friday Agreement provides a template for resolving conflict. The principles that go to the heart of the Agreement are the same principles that provided the inspiration for the European Union, which I have often argued is the single greatest example of conflict resolution in the history of the world.

As Jean Monnet put it at the time:

“We are not building a coalition of states, we are uniting people.”

This is a very powerful statement that tells us that the European Union is an idea that should inspire us in Ireland as we seek to create permanent peace. It is an idea about how to end conflict forever. It is an idea about uniting millions of people in all their diversity under a common banner of purpose, by working on the issues that affect everyone. It is an idea about protecting and promoting human rights for all people.

The values of partnership, equality, tolerance, respect for difference and inclusion are the values that provided the inspiration for our Agreement in Northern Ireland. They are the values of the European Union and they are values that will be central to the resolution of conflict anywhere in the world.

It is clear that the role, both practical and inspirational, played by the European Union as the peace process in Northern Ireland developed to the point at which it stands today, has been critical.

My deep belief in the European Union is well known, not alone as a tool for social, economic and cultural change, but also as a philosophy that contains the key to conflict resolution in every corner of the globe.

Europe, by 1945, appeared intractably divided. Its peoples had only just emerged from the second bloody and bitter war of the twentieth century that had left many millions dead. The principles of respect, tolerance, partnership and the development of common economic interests seemed completely unobtainable. Yet within a few years the understanding that human beings cannot live apart prevailed. We are destined to live and work together.

In 2002, the European Union stands as the most vibrant testimony to the ideal that we are all better working with each other and for each other. Put simply, the

European Union is the single most potent symbol of conflict resolution in our history.

The political importance of the European Union is central. It has been an inspiration to us all in the search for peace in Ireland. The structures of the EU are clearly reflected in our new political institutions. It has helped us to develop the habit of working together within Northern Ireland and between the two parts of the island, as well as transforming relations within these islands. It has helped us to create a more outward looking, forward thinking society.

As I have often said, all conflict is about difference, whether it is in terms of nationality, race or religion. The answer to difference therefore is to respect it, not fight about it. It is an accident of birth and should never be the source of hatred or conflict and should never be used to justify the use of violence. I believe we should live for the causes we believe in, not kill for them.

Respect for difference is therefore the first principle of European Union. It is also the first principle of the Good Friday Agreement because all identities are respected and there is no victory for any side.

The second principle of European Union is the institutions that respect those differences - the Council of Ministers, the civil service commission and the Parliament - drawn from all countries. That principle is also central to the Good Friday Agreement, with the Assembly and the Executive both elected by proportional representation to ensure that all sections of our people are represented and councils of ministers for both Irish and British relationships.

The third principle of the European Union is that the representatives of the different member countries work together on their common interests, largely social and economic. That is, in effect, what I call the healing process because by working

together they have left behind the distrusts and prejudices of the past and the new Europe has evolved. It is still evolving.

That third principle is also the third principle of our Good Friday Agreement and indeed in many ways it is the most important one. As our public representatives work together in our common interests we will erode the distrust and the prejudices of the past and a new Ireland will evolve based on agreement and respect for difference. That is the real solution. It won't happen in a day or a week. It won't happen by revolution. It will happen by evolution and that process, as I stated earlier, is already underway.

And now, the European Union itself is going through fundamental change on an unprecedented scale as it embraces the challenges of enlargement. Under the Danish Presidency, the Union is undergoing massive change that will redefine the nature of Europe itself, demand new relationships with countries such as Russia and Turkey and see the Union expand to almost 500 million people.

The citizens of central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean states deserve the benefits of EU membership. It will bring them prosperity through trade. It will raise the standard of rights protection. It will replace the conflict of the past with the stability and solidarity of a peaceful future.

Enlargement will also bring major benefits to the people of Ireland, North and South. It will bring us more investment and jobs through access to new and enlarged markets for our goods. And in a wider sense that will benefit us all, enlargement will help eliminate wars, such as happened in the Balkans in recent years. It will raise environmental standards, reducing pollution from eastern industry in the western states and lessening the potential for another Chernobyl from nuclear installations in applicant states.

While enlargement will allow us to project the values of social justice, human rights and democracy to our fellow Europeans to the east and south, we must develop further our capacity to expand our influence beyond the boundaries of our continent. A bigger Union will add to the strength of our collective voice around the world.

At the beginning of a new millennium, our hope must be that a new Europe will play a central role in creating a better world for all people. We must work to ensure that the core values and principles of the European Union will ensure that there is an end to all conflict and a future of lasting peace for all.

The people of Ireland are aware of the responsibility in our hands not to let go of the opportunity we now have to end our conflict forever. We know as well the rest of the world is looking towards us for that beacon of hope and assurance that the seemingly impossible is indeed possible. We will not let the world down.